

THE BATA DANCER



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Rotimi Ogunjobi

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Аннотация

A theatre scriptwriter loses his job, his marriage and his only child. He travels to a rural town in search of a quiet place to reorganize his confused life. Here he again meets with a legendary Bata dancer and the reunion rekindles his ambition to write a new play. But his success will depend on how much he is able to understand the mysterious language of the Bata drums and dance

His bitter past has left him with the fear of another relationship and when the charming and compassionate daughter of his aged mentor comes into his life, he finds himself in a desperate battle against his resolve. But his new companion is a healing angel who mends his heartbreak and disabilities and teaches him the way of a master Bata dancer.

Yomi Bello is a scriptwriter for the Heritage Theater. He has temporarily lost his job and his estranged wife has gone away with his only child. Yomi travels to a small rural town to take up a temporary teaching appointment in a private school, and to find a quiet place to rearrange his life.

Yomi again meets with Baba Lamidi, a legendary Bata dancer. The reunion rekindles Yomi's intention to write a new play, but his success

will depend on how much he is able to learn of the mysterious language of the Bata drums and dance

There are great challenges along his way forward nevertheless. The native craftsmen and artists are hostile and contemptuous. Baba Lamidi is also old, frail, and very often ill, which makes him an unreliable teacher. Nevertheless, Yomi Bello is determined that his new play, *The Bata Dancer* will be the greatest dance drama to be played at the Heritage Theater when it eventually reopens.

Bitter experiences have left Yomi with the fear of another relationship, and when Ajoke, the delightful and very helpful daughter of Baba Lamidi comes into his life, he finds himself in a desperate battle against his resolve. Ajoke becomes to him a healing angel for his innermost miseries and for a severe limp. She also teaches Yomi enough about the Bata culture to make him perform like a master.

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The Bata Dancer

A Novel By

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DEDICATIONS

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents:

Samuel Mofolorunso Ogunjobi (July 21, 1919 - August 23,

1963)

Eunice Olufolaju Ogunjobi (April 4, 1929 – January 1, 2014)

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Prologue - The Coming of the Drummer

The hunter heard an approaching. He needed to get neither spear nor sword ready. The footfalls on the carpet of rotten leaves, was not of a beast - the gait was too resolute. The hunter could not see what was approaching. The thickets, the overhanging tree branches of the dense jungle quite effectively blocked even the faint rays of the sun as dawn approached. The hunter felt the presence even more than he heard it. He also felt fear.

The creature eventually came into view, and by some mystery was before the hunter even before he knew that it was coming near. Whether it was a man or a woman, he could not immediately tell, but for simplicity he would assume that it was a man, even though swathed from head to toe in a dark cloth, his strikingly white eyes peering out of the dark hole which shrouded the face.

Irunmole. The hunter would think that before him was one of those benevolent entities of wisdom and enlightenment. But an alternative thought advised the hunter that he may be in the presence of a mischievous demon pretending to be one of those, of which there were thousands roaming the forest. He felt fear, but he knew in the alternative case, the primary strategy for

surviving such a perilous encounter was never to show fear.

The leaves on the ground were wet with dew, and the smell of advanced decay, mixed with the mouldy smell on the stranger's robe, roughly woven like that of the *Ibariba* people, further confused his senses. Yet he knew that his heart must not fail; to show fear might be to die.

“What do you want of me?” the hunter asked the creature.

“Is there a place, not too far away from this place where human beings live?” he heard the creature reply, even though he could not see the lips more. The hunter knew that he needed to be careful. You must never tell a demon where you live.

“No, I do not know such a place”, the hunter lied. The creature was for a long moment silent, seeming to search the mind of the hunter, seeming determined to intimidate him with his mysterious presence.

“Where did you come from?” the creature spoke as if into the hunter's head.

“My village is far away; but nonetheless, I perceive that another must be near, for I saw foot tracks on the banks of a stream not too distant from this place”, the hunter again lied, as he pointed in the direction from which he came.

“May peace be with you”, the creature said. He proceeded away, taking long and purposeful strides, crushing dry twigs and bramble underfoot, yet not a branch or leaf of the trees and bushes along the way was disturbed.

“What is your name?” the hunter inquired after the creature,

without any hope of a response. The creature for a fraction of a minute paused in his progress.

“My name is Ayangalu”, he replied. He again hastened forward, his steps more purposeful, more resolute.

The hunter stood watching him walk away, looking neither to the back nor to the side; the sound of his footfalls progressively fading away, until, he could neither see nor hear the creature anymore. All that was left of the encounter were the stamped patches in the carpet of compost, where the creature had placed his feet, in his passage.

If you ever meet a strange being in the forest, it is a sign that you must return home at once, because danger lurks beyond. Of this, the hunter had been warned since he was a child. Obeying his heart therefore, he abandoned his current expedition and began to return home; playfully placing his feet in the footmarks of the creature, until he got to the stream, which was a mile away. And from this place he could no more decide which footmarks to follow, because several, led to disparate destinations.

Ayangalu arrived at noon in a large town. He had washed himself at the river, and his robe was now wrapped around him, only up to the shoulder. He walked resolutely, he walked with purpose.

This day, was coronation day at the town. A new king was being crowned and everywhere there was singing and dancing. The musician played on simple instruments hewn from dried huge gourds. They played melodies on the hard, dry back of their

igba - huge bowls cut from the gourds, which they beat with little dry sticks. . Some played accompaniments on their *sekere*: whole gourds, hollowed, dried and wrapped in netting strung with beads and corral shell for percussion. It was a joyous event, and as it is said, the *sekere* does not attend a gathering of mourners. The musicians played skilfully and joyfully.

The music was good, but not fit for majesty, Ayangalu would pensively observe. He sat and watched, for long. He shared of the abundance of food, and drank of the abundance of wine from the palm tree; and at dusk he retired to the edge of the town, into a bed of gathered leaves. Ayangalu could no more remember where he came from nor how far he had travelled; these were no more important. He knew he had reached his place of destiny. He slept happily

The next day, Ayangalu rose to a pressing purpose. He discovered not too far away from his night bed, a mature tree. He cut it down, cut a piece of the soft trunk, and hollowed out a cylinder. One of the open ends, he covered with the flayed skin of a wild boar. Satisfied with his handiwork, he set it in the sun to dry.

At evening, when the musicians again gathered with the congregation to make merry and to rejoice with the king, Ayangalu picked up his handiwork and joined with them. And as the king stood to dance, Ayangalu straddled his own instrument and with his palms beat an accompaniment to the regular orchestra of *igba* and *sekere*. The hollow throb of

the beat mellowed down the high-pitched chatter of the other instruments. Together, they produced a more pleasant music, kinder to the ear, friendlier to the dancing legs. The king was joyful; he showered Ayangalu with praise and with money. The folks were also filled with amazement at the skill of the stranger who came with the strange instrument of which he clearly was a master.

“Stranger, what is the name of this thing?” the king was curious enough to ask.

“*Ilu*“, Ayangalu answered. “The name is *ilu* – the thing which is beaten. I also call it drum”

The coronation was a seven day event. Every evening, Ayangalu came with his drum, and played for the pleasure of the king. And in appreciation, the folks of the town daily fed him till he could eat no more and gave him wine to drink till he every night stumbled away to his bed.

The hunter saw Ayangalu playing his drum in the midst of the merrymakers. He saw Ayangalu where he slept every night uncovered under the moon and the stars. The hunter recognised Ayangalu, not because of his ageless face which he never previously saw, but because of the coarse robe, the musty smell of which refused to be dismissed from memory.

“Come sleep in my house.” the hunter suggested. But Ayangalu would not. He built a hut at the edge of the town and from there crafted more drums of several shapes and timbre. And whenever and wherever there was celebration, Ayangalu would

pick up his drum, any of his many drums which had the right voice for each occasion. And all would come from near and far to dance to the merry beat of Ayangalu's drum.

"Come teach me this wonderful craft", the hunter came to him, and also did many other of the young men. And they daily gathered at the front of Ayangalu's hut; and he taught them the mysteries of the drum. Again, the hunter came to Ayangalu and said:

"I shall present you a wife; a beautiful maiden of your choice. And of her you shall have children, many of them, so that your wisdom should remain forever amongst us in these lands". But Ayangalu, smiled, slowly shook his head and replied:

"I have no child. I do not want a child. You shall all be my children, and *Ayan* shall be your names"

And so took the hunter the name of Ayantunji and another man, the name of Ayandele, and yet another took the name of Ayanniyi, and so it became that each of the disciples of the drum were named in such a fashion. Day after day, the heart-rousing sounds of drumming came to be heard from all over the town, as the followers of Ayangalu with child-like glee and abandon celebrated their new proficiency. One morning, the disciples of the drum came as before to gather before their master, but in vain they called and searched, for Ayangalu was nowhere again to be found.

Time passed. Drummers for generations thereafter made drums of their own and each after their own names. The

drummer, whose name was Dundun, made himself drums, shaped like an hourglass. Around the rims of the skin-covered ends he fixed little brass bells which jingled merrily while he played his instrument. His drums were made for merrymaking of all and sundry. The drummer whose name was Gbedu made himself a drum, to which all else but kings, lieutenants and kingmakers were forbidden to dance. Bata made his drums from trees cut from the edge of the well-travelled roads, and which had therefore heard much of conversation and thus were consequently wiser. The voice of the drum of Bata came out shrill and harsh, demanding, commanding to be matched in zest and spirit by the able-bodied dancer. Some made drums for merrymaking, some made drums for ceremonies, and some made drums for the pleasure of the deities.

And there came a time when the Immortals, the *Orisa* were gathered to be entertained. And the drummer and their drums congregated also and came each after another to display their dexterity and their voices before the keepers of the sacred shrines. They brought drums in their different shapes, in their different sizes, in the different voices. They knew nevertheless that the *Orisa* were selective, each discerning of the instruments to be brought before them. The drummers knew that even though the deities loved to dance, each danced with a regal individuality. And of their dances there were four hundred and one variations, as many as there were of the *Orisa*.

They knew nevertheless that not one *Orisa* rejected or was ever

displeased by the several drums of Dundun, from the *gudugudu* to the *kerikeri*. The ensemble of Dundun came always with happy instruments. They were fashioned after the pleasure of the entire pantheon of Orisa. But the Orisa, also of the many drums each selected favourites. Obatala, in whose hands were all the wisdoms of the entire world, favoured the deep-throated throb of the *Igbin* drum. Osun, custodian of the mysteries of procreation was ever thrilled by the seductive serenading of the *Bembe* drum. And whenever Sango, the violent one heard the frenetic beat of *Bata*, his delight came so great that the earth trembled with thunder and lighting criss-crossed the sky like jagged javelins hurled by clouds at one another in fierce battles of pleasure.

CHAPTER 1

Yomi Bello walked slowly and carefully as if he feared that he would stumble and fall. His limp from a childhood injury, normally slight and barely noticeable, this afternoon appeared like a major impediment even on this flat concrete roadway. His mind was occupied by an incongruous mixture of emotions; he felt sadness, relief, excitement and even a bit of fear. Most important was that, as the warm rays of the sun stung his face, for the first time in more than seven years, he felt delightfully free.

Yomi walked away from the building that housed the Ministry of Culture at the government secretariat and towards the car park where he left his car. Saying goodbye was never one of the things he knew how to do well. He had just left the office of his friend, Debola Adebayo who was Director in this government department, and also in charge of the Heritage Theater, a cultural project where Yomi had been for eight years employed as a scriptwriter.

His friend, Debola, was even sadder when Yomi came to his office to say goodbye.

“Never mind Yomi; I am sure the Theater will be back in a few more months”, Debola assured.

“It’s been down for more than two years”, Yomi reminded.

“I know. Government does not have the money to support it anymore, but I’ve been talking to some other sponsors and I am

very hopeful”, Debola told him.

But life is not about having hopes, but rather about heeding reality. For nearly two years now there had been little to do at the office. The pay was not regular either, and he only survived by offering private home tutoring for parents who could afford such for their children. On the positive side however, he used the opportunity to complete his Masters degree at the University of Ibadan. Today, he was on his way to Ijebu-Jesa, where a private secondary school had given him a contract job as English tutor. It would be a better job situation than what he presently had; at least he would be regularly paid.

“You know I will be back as soon as you give me a call”, Yomi assured his friend .He surely would miss Debola, but he consoled himself that driving from Ijebu-Jesa to Ibadan would take him less than three hours, if a meeting became urgently needed.

Debola had been more than helpful. Debola procured for him a study leave albeit without pay and which the administrators were pleased to accept for Yomi: they had no money to pay anyway. The Heritage Theater project had been for nearly three years unfinanced. The project had not been formally closed down, only shunted off the tracks of government fiscal duties. The dozen or so regular employees were not formally asked to go away; each only left to make common sense decisions on the basis of their individual personal challenges. That was usually how things worked in Government.

But Yomi wasn't leaving Ibadan just because the new job

had better prospects. There were deeper persuasions. One of them was his recently retired marriage. This particular episode of his life always filled him with conflicting emotions – relief, happiness and sadness. He would feel relief that a very bad relationship was finally over; he would feel happiness that he was now completely free of it; he would feel sadness for his young son Damilola, only four years old, and caught in the middle of bitterness between the two people he loved most in the world and would possibly in future, wonder whether he had been the cause of it all.

Nearly anywhere he went in the city, he is confronted with the rubbles of his collapsed relationship. He would remember those places he went with Elizabeth when the marriage subsisted; he would remember those places he took his son when the going was still good; he would remember the smiles, the hugs, the strident demands of the little tot crying “*daddy, carry me!*” even when he had just moments before demanded to be permitted to walk by himself. All these memories, echoed from the landscape all around, regularly reawakening the sadness of his loss.

Not that there was any regret that it all ended so badly; indeed his surprise was how it took so long to end. How his marriage with Elizabeth lasted as long as seven years? Looking back, he would be surprised at how little they had in common as interests, he and Elizabeth. The facts were that nothing he did ever interested her; neither was he able to discover what it was that interested her apart from the fact that she definitely enjoyed

scolding him. It had been for him quite a hellish marriage.

Crashed and beyond repair. If their relationship was a vehicle, that would be the description of its present condition. : crashed and beyond repair. His most desirable aim was to immediately put some distance between himself and the twisted carcass; as much distance as possible. He needed healing for his bleeding heart. He needed closure from that part of his life that had been so much a disaster, and given him the greatest feeling of failure, ever. He needed a place of quietness, to start reconstructing the ruins of his life from an entirely new set of plans. This job at Ijebu-Jesa was therefore a marvellous godsend.

Running away. Running away from your challenges; his much younger self would have sneered. But what do young people know, Yomi thought? A dead marriage and a sad child, who would probably become traumatised by it all for life, had taught him great lessons. He was a lot wiser now than his cocky younger self.

Yomi opened the door of his car, a grey 1990 Honda Accord and slipped into the driver's seat. The clock on the dashboard told him the time was a quarter after three. It was a fine day in August. The weather was good and it was a nice sunny day, even though he could see some dark cloud looming in the far distance. He reckoned that it would take him a maximum of three hours to get to his destination despite the densely cratered highway he must travel through. His luggage was in the boot – a large suitcase and two smaller ones. The large suitcase contained his clothes;

the others contained books, shoes and other knick-knack. He started the car, eased it out of the park and into the road. He took another parting look at the Ministry of Culture building, his office for the last eight years. He hoped he would be back, and he hoped that he would return stronger in vision and in spirit.

An Old School music programme was playing Michael Jackson from the FM stereo. It was a dolorous ballad, Never Can Say Goodbye.

“Even though the pain and heartache seems to follow me wherever I go....” Michael Jackson sang. Yomi loved Old School music from the Seventies. He thought they were the only popular music that had a future. He also loved Michael Jackson’s music, but this afternoon, the song that was playing only made him sad. He found a compilation from his car CD rack, and fed it into the player. McFadden & Whitehead rumbled out from his car speakers. . He turned up the volume and sang along. He loved this particular song, and it gave him the courage he desperately needed this day.

“And if you’ve ever been down before
I know that you refuse to be held down anymore
Don’t you let nothing, nothing
Stand in your way.....”

It took him more than thirty minutes to escape the city traffic and to get on the inter-city highway leading to the town of Ile Ife. His final destination would be about twenty or thirty kilometres away from Ife, which he felt should be no more than one hour

away considering all normal obstacles.

Fifteen minutes or so into the highway, he discovered where those dark clouds he had before seen in the distance, were massed. The rain came down in a huge torrent and he drove very slowly because of low visibility. The rain lasted more than an hour and terminated suddenly in one of those baffling wonders of nature. Suddenly he looked before him and the road was clear even though a bit wet, and he looked behind from his rear mirror to see that the rain still poured down like the end of the world was nigh. But an even bigger disaster soon happened to his travel. He drove over a water-filled crater in the road, and as soon as he passed through, the front wheel of his car came suddenly apart. Yomi examined the damage and was distressed to find that there was no way the journey could continue without getting it repaired. The drive shaft was definitely finished. He had frequently seen this happen to many Honda vehicles but this was his first personal experience. He didn't imagine that it could have happened to him at a worse time and place.

Bad omen. Normally, he would have considered this a bad omen, a sign that his mission was destined for failure. But omens were meant to be believed by people with alternative choices. In his present fighting frame of mind, he shrugged the incident off as just a nuisance, just another hurdle to cross on his way to claim a prize. The rain had slowed him down immensely, and the time was now nearly five. Nevertheless, he reckoned he was about fifteen kilometres to Ife. He had two choices; one was to

wait for a tow truck to come by, the other was to travel to Ife to fetch a mechanic. He considered that the first choice would be about being merely hopeful, because it was not certain that a tow truck would come along. He therefore decided on the other; locked up the car, and travelled with a passing taxi to Ife.

Luck was with him, he imagined. Yomi found a Honda mechanic workshop near the edge of town, and which was really not any kind of miracle because nearly every mechanic repaired Honda cars, or claimed they could. He found the owner, and thirty minutes later they were both on their way back to the place where he had left his car along with the parts he needed to repair his Honda.

Nevertheless, the repair took much longer than previously imagined.

“We forgot to buy the lubrication grease”, the mechanic wailed. And so the mechanic needed to phone an apprentice to bring some. It was around seven and nearly totally dark before the car was once again fit to travel. Yomi dropped the mechanic and his apprentice off at Ife. It was not until nearly eight that he was finally able to continue his journey.

He was tired; he should have found a hotel in Ife, in which to spend the night, he thought. But, he was determined to get to his destination for the fear that the resolve, with which he started out, might be harmed by his failure to conclude his journey tonight. He travelled carefully, once again driving slowly, not quite trusting what the mechanic had done and considering the

possibility that the wheel could once again come loose on this inhospitable road and at such a bad time of the night.

CHAPTER 2

The rest of the journey was thankfully concluded without further incident.

“Where can I find a hotel in this town?” Yomi asked someone along the wide highway which bisected the small town. He indeed knew he had left two hotels behind, both less than five kilometres from town; both with rates higher than what he could afford to pay. And so he wisely moved on. The helpful lad finally directed him to a place called Jolly Guest House which was further up, and near the centre of the town.

Yomi had never liked hotels. He liked this one even a lot less. The room he was offered was cramped and scantily equipped and had a single blue light bulb dangling from the ceiling, giving a suggestion of what sinister activities this accommodation was prepared to cater to most nights and possibly in the daytime too. His imagination served him images of brief sexual trysts; a more decent inner prodding however told him that such a nice and peaceful little town was unlikely to accommodate that much iniquity, at least not on a regular basis.

The room was cheap though, which was all he presently cared about. Nevertheless, he knew he couldn't stay here for long. First, because he did not like sleeping in hotel beds, secondly because he just couldn't afford to stay in the hotel for more than a few days. The next step of his plan was to urgently rent a flat for

himself as soon as possible.

Yomi was tired and slept soundly. He woke up feeling so weak next morning. There was no running water from the shower of his en-suite room. He washed himself with water brought for him in a metal bucket. Feeling livelier, he went to the reception. The person he found there was, a neatly-dressed young man who didn't appear to have lost any sleep during the night.

“Where can I get a bottle of tonic water?” Yomi asked, hoping to be able to find a drink to pep himself up with. The night-shift receptionist looked for a while confused.

“The medicine store is not yet opened”, the receptionist finally replied, quite confidently. Yomi smiled, thankful he had not asked for soda water. Thankful that he would probably have been, consequently served a bowl of water with a bar of laundry soap inside it.

Outside, the air was fresh, more invigorating than he had experienced for many years. He felt renewed; he felt accomplished. It was relatively unpolluted with effluents either from vehicles or from machinery. In his mind, Yomi felt like a freshly released convict, wishing to do joyful cartwheels, but mindful that the saner world would not approve. Far away he could see towering hills, completely covered with green flora and faintly enshrouded by a grey morning mist. People said those hills were inhabited by monkeys of nearly every type, but he neither saw nor heard one.

Yomi went on a hopeful stroll down the street. It was around

eight in the morning but there was little traffic on the roads, and nobody seemed yet in a hurry to get any work done at all; today was Saturday. A few scantily stocked grocery kiosks were open; most offered no more than small stacks of bread on decrepit wooden tables outside and in front. He was by his nose drawn further down the road, where a portly woman fried akara in red palm oil. He bought four of the fried bean cakes together with small loaf of soft bread. He also bought a can of Coca Cola from another shop as he returned to his hotel room. The akara did an excellent job of completely waking him up. It contained whole finger of red hot chillies, which had him whistling as the pepper exploded in his mouth. Later, his breakfast concluded, he returned to the reception, which was now occupied by a hard-faced young lady, freshly resumed for the morning shift.

“Where can I find an estate agent in this town?” Yomi pleasantly enquired. The young lady appeared as nonplussed as the night-shift person; and for a long minute struggled for an appropriate response to the question. The situation was saved by the erstwhile night duty person who again emerged from a back office on his way home. He halted for a moment to ask what the conversation was all about. Yomi repeated his question for the young man’s benefit: he wanted to know where to find a real estate agent

“Why are you looking for an estate agent?” the lad asked, needlessly suspicious.

“I want to rent a small flat, or room”, Yomi explained.

The young man and the lady exchanged anxious glances. They both seemed torn between loyalty to an employer and the more desirable duty of giving a stranger a helping hand. Good breeding won.

“There is one on the main road, if you come with me, I will show you where it is”, he offered.

Yomi was quite happy to go along with him. He took the man in his car and they were there in a few minutes; after which the young man departed on his own way.

The estate agent’s office was nothing more than one of a row of shops in a thirty foot long unpainted block. His was the only shop that had a glass front, and it stood out amongst the other battened-up fronts. In front of the shop was a tripod-mounted notice board upon which some sheets of paper were tacked. Each typed sheet, Yomi would find, indicated homes listed, either for sale or for rent. The shop keeper girl he found inside made him to know that it might take some time for her boss to come. It was a little after ten; Yomi chose to wait and was given a metal chair to sit on. The shop keeper placed a call to the owner of the business to inform that a possible customer was waiting in the office. Yomi also used the opportunity to call his friend Debola, to assure him that he arrived safely at his destination. The noise of traffic, gradually built up outside as the other shops were one after the other opened.

A sweaty middle-age man arrived about forty-five minutes later, full of apologies. His name was Falana. He listened

patiently as Yomi described his requirement.

“I am looking for an inexpensive accommodation – a room or a small flat.” Yomi explained to Falana.

“Where are you from?” Falana wanted to know. It was a question which Yomi did not think was unreasonable.

“I am from Ibadan and I have come to do some work here. I have just got a job to teach at a school in this town. I don’t know how long I am going to be here for, but it certainly will be for at least six months “, Yomi replied.

Falana sat with hands splayed over his face, and appeared for a long minute deep in thought, digesting the information before him. .

“I may have something for you but you will not be able to view it till tomorrow. However, before then you need to pay three thousand Naira as consultation fees”, Falana finally said. Yomi knew about these illegal fees. You had the choice of refusing to pay, and which translated to your being unable to find a place to rent.

“I will bring the money to you tomorrow, or whenever you are ready to take me to see the house”, Yomi offered. Falana seemed discomfited by this suggestion.

“I may even be able to let you see the house by this evening, if I can get the keys from the owner this afternoon”, he quickly said.

“In that case, I will bring the money this evening”, Yomi told him.

Yomi took Falana’s phone number and give him his own too,

happy that Falana promised to give him a call before five in the evening. Till then he had nothing to do but explore the little town.

He drove aimlessly around the town and even travelled as far to the nearby bigger town of Ilesha. He drove back again through Ijebu-jesha and took another turn westward down to Esa Oke where there was a small Polytechnic. The lonely road, which passed through pristine subsistence farmlands, flooded his mind with peace.

Yomi believed that *Coming of the Drummer* was the best play he wrote at the Heritage Theater. It was subsequently recorded for television. The fictional story was adapted from Yoruba traditional folklore about how drums and drummers came to be. Both stage play and film were so well praised that he was encouraged to do something similar.

It was shortly after, that he met Lamidi Ojedeji, whose Osumare Drum and Dance Troupe, was famous in the travelling entertainment circuit, far and wide. Yomi's first contact with Baba Lamidi, as everyone fondly called him was about eight years ago. Together, Yomi and Debola ad travelled to Ijebu-Jesa to invite Baba Lamidi and his dance and drum troupe to the official opening event of the Heritage Theater. Baba, who was at that time in his sixties, could only participate in the rather strenuous dancing for a few minutes, but the encounter left a lasting impression on Yomi.

The meeting with Baba Lamidi planted a seed idea for a new stage play he planned one day in the future to write - a one-act

monologue, which he titled *The Bata Dancer*. Yomi knew there would yet be a lot to do, because this new play project had all to do with a theme which he knew practically nothing about. Dance would be a major element of the new play, more specifically the Bata dance.

Now back again in Ijebu-Jesa, he hoped to be able to find the required presence of mind to concentrate on writing *The Bata Dancer*. Above all, Yomi hoped that Baba Lamidi Ojedeji was still alive, because he hadn't seen him in eight years.

It wasn't too difficult to locate Baba Lamidi's house, in this small town. Yomi had been to visit twice before. It was a well-built storey building with a large front courtyard. The building showed signs that it was built by someone of more than average means. The tired brown paint however suggested that the owner was tired of beautifying a perpetual cost-centre

"Who are you looking for?" . Yomi was accosted at the gate by a lady as he entered Baba Lamidi's compound. She looked about five years or so younger than him and had a deep voice, almost like a man's voice. Her voice sounded rather nice and pleasant though. Yomi thought she looked nearly out of place in front of this house.

"I am looking for Baba Lamidi", Yomi reciprocated her pleasantness.

"What do you want to see him about", the lady persisted.

"I've been here before. I am from Ibadan and I just thought to drop in to say hello", Yomi replied.

“He is not at home; he has travelled” the lady told him, regretfully.

“When do you think he will be back?” Yomi asked.

“He has travelled to Oyo for an event, and we are not expecting him till tomorrow or the day after”, she explained.

“That is disappointing. In any case, I am here for much longer and I will certainly return to see him “Yomi said.

“Okay then, you are welcome”, the lady replied.

Yomi turned and returned to his car. He thought he should have asked the lady what her name was, but refrained from going back to do that. The last thing he wanted at this time was to earn the distrust of a community in which he was yet a visitor. He noted nevertheless that she was quite attractive. She had an unusual deep voice, but the most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

Yomi found a buka restaurant and bought himself a meal of pounded yam and melon seed stew. He ate greedily; the stew was very spicy and just the way he loved his food. Afterward, he returned to the hotel and there sat in the lobby, listening to an aimless and lively debate between three employees, about the music and politics of the day. Falana eventually called at about a quarter to five. Yomi drove to Falana’s office, and together they went to the place which the estate agent was to show him. It was a nasty house; an unkempt tenement building with four dungeon-like rooms on either side of a dark corridor running the entire length of the house. Outside was filthy, with a green stream running right across the front yard. Goats, pigs and chicken

roamed unhindered, and the ground all around was littered with their faeces .Yomi was very disappointed to have been brought here.

“This is not even a bit like what I hoped you would find for me. Not anywhere near what I described.” He spiritedly tried to mask his disappointment and anger.

“It is not expensive; you definitely said you are looking for a place that is not expensive”, Falana told him.

“Yes I did say that, but I certainly didn’t say I was looking to live in a dunghill”, Yomi affirmed.

“Okay, I will look for something else”, Falana told him as they returned to the car.

“How soon will this be? My need is rather urgent”, Yomi reminded.

“As soon as I am able to find another, I will let you know. I will need to talk to some landlords. But you know, because you are stranger in this place, the landlords may not be so willing, which makes my work much more difficult”, Falana told him, successfully making Yomi feel like he was the reason why he might not be able to find a house.

Falana promised to again call him next day as Yomi dropped him off at his office. Yomi knew of course that Falana was unlikely to call because next day was Sunday. He returned to the hotel, unable to get over the disappointment he felt. He sat for a while in the hotel bar, ordered a bottle of beer which he drank quickly. He fetched a book from the box in the boot of his car,

and then bought another beer which he decided to take to his room.

The title of the book was Eegun Alare, and it was written in Yoruba. It told the story of an itinerant performing masquerade, an Eegun Alare , who left his town in search of fame and fortune, both of which he eventually found. However, he meets with disaster when a magic trick goes wrong and he find self unable to change back from the crocodile which he turned himself into, because raindrops fell on him, and this was a taboo. Yomi could only read the story half way this time before he had to lay it down. Reading Yoruba as an adult was somehow no more easy to do for him; which was quite strange since as a child he read stories in that language without any difficulty at all. This one was written in verse, which made it even more difficult to read.

He though the story of Eegun Alare resonated well with his personal quest. He also left familiar home grounds in search of a new beginning. He wasn't an itinerant performer like Ojelade the masquerade, but he was nevertheless also in search of bigger achievements. Ojelade was a master of his art though, while he was still floundering and yet in search of himself.

Beyond the mysticism which accompanied Ojelade's quest, he would recognise that dance still remained the foundation skill of the typical itinerant performing masquerade. Baba Lamidi's Osumare Troupe was the most awesome dance Yomi had ever seen. Seven costumed acrobats and dancers completely arrested the attention of the spectators for nearly a full hour, and still

at the end of it all, the audience were sorry to see them leave. A news reporter attempted to interview Baba Lamidi after the performance, but this never happened. Baba seemed more insulted than happy that his skill could be considered of mere entertainment value. On this day though, the leader of the drummers, a young man whose name was Ayankunle, was too happy to be interviewed instead.

“The drums have voices of their own; individually and collectively. If you don’t understand the language of the Bata drums, it is impossible to dance to it.”, Ayankunle mentioned in the interview, and that quote haunted Yomi for days. He was sufficiently intrigued, to again go in search of Baba Lamidi a few weeks later. This time he felt like there was nothing more desirable to him than learning how those drums spoke. He came visiting Ijebu-Jesa midweek and found Baba Lamidi at a game of Ayo in the courtyard in front of his house. Yomi recognised his game opponent as Ayankunle, the drummer who stood for him at the interview.

He was grateful and happy that Baba Lamidi still remembered him, after he introduced himself, mentioning the Heritage Theater.

“I want to learn the language of the drums. Can you possibly teach me?” Yomi quite nearly blurted out. He was discomfited by Ayankunle’s persistent stare at his legs; and apparently the young man doubted that the limp in Yomi’s leg could be an asset to anyone at all. Baba Lamidi also appeared trying to find the

kindest reply to give this young fool from the city.

“What you have asked from me is like the head of an elephant. It is too heavy for a child to carry”, Baba Lamidi told him, very amused.

“Yes I do realize that, but when a burden is too heavy for a child to carry, he calls on his father for help; and that is why I am here” Yomi reverently replied . Baba Lamidi nodded his head wisely.

“And why do you choose to carry this particular burden?” Baba Lamidi again asked.

“I have been in the Heritage Theater for nearly two years. I have seen dance of almost every type, but I must say I have ever seen anything like your troupe does, and that is why I am here.” Yomi replied.

“Is that so?” Baba Lamidi seemed flattered.

“Yes, after watching you, my heart told me there is a destiny in this for me. I want to know the language of the drums” . , Yomi persisted

“Okay I will do as you wish; but how much are you willing to pay for this?” Baba Lamidi laughed. Yomi remembered that Ayankunle mentioned during his interview, that Baba ran a school. Not quite a formal school, but a rigorous and dedicated apprenticeship.

“I am willing to pay the price” Yomi eagerly said, sure that whatever the amount was, could not be beyond his means, considering that this town was far from being a place which

regularly accommodated the wealthy.

“I shall think about it. I also want you to go away and also think about it” Baba told him. Yomi sat with them for a couple of hours more, enjoying the banter , sharing with them, the keg of palm wine which he had very thoughtfully bought on his way, as a gift to Baba Lamidi. He watched the game that was in progress and at which the younger man Ayankunle, was unhappy to be constantly losing.

By next morning, and after returning to Ibadan, Yomi agreed with himself that travelling to Ijebu-Jesa every weekend was indeed an impractical and ridiculous thought.

But now back again in Ijebu-Jesa and not about to leave for some time, the quest became again reawakened. He could once more clearly hear the voice of the Bata drums. Only he did not yet understand.

CHAPTER 3

On Monday morning, Yomi drove to Maven Private School, the school which employed him to teach English. The school was accommodated in three storey high buildings arranged around about a five thousand square yard quadrangle of lush green field. The principal, Mrs Adele Obembe, a pleasant woman of about fifty was very pleased to see him.

“I hope you don’t have to travel from Ibadan every morning”, she jested.

“Not at all. I arrived on Friday and I am presently staying in a hotel”, Yomi laughed.

“Good gracious! That must be very expensive “, Mrs Obembe was genuinely horrified.

“I really don’t have an alternative yet. I asked an estate agent to find me a flat but he is yet to do that. He promised to call “, Yomi also regretted.

The principal took Yomi around the school and introduced him to the rest of the staff. Yomi asked to take two days off to resolve his accommodation issue and Mrs Obembe was pleased to oblige.

Falana had not called him on Sunday, nor this morning. Yomi phoned him to ask how he was getting on.

“I have not yet found a place which fits your requirement. Please have a little more patience”, Falana explained with what

Yomi suspected was contrived sadness. Yomi was dismayed. He often heard a lot about this sort of swindle but never thought it could ever happen to him. This morning his heart told him that he had thrown away three thousand Naira.

Not sure of what to do next, he went looking again for Baba Lamidi. He remembered that the lady he'd previously met told him Baba Lamidi was expected back on Sunday, which was the previous day. Baba Lamidi was about to leave home when Yomi arrived.

“*Alakowe*, you have come again?” Baba Lamidi was surprised to see him. Yomi was delighted that this old man whom he hadn't seen in eight years still remembered him. *Alakowe* was a generic reference to a young scholar, and depending on how much mischief the speaker had in mind, it could be spoken in endearment or as a cloaked insult.

“I am pleased that you still remember me Baba. I am not *Alakowe*, I am your son” Yomi laughed.

“Okay, my son, what is your mission this time?” Baba asked.

“Nothing specific, Baba. I have just come to say hello. I was here two days ago, but a young lady I met here told me you'd gone away on a journey”, Yomi told him.

“Oh, it was you that came looking for me. My daughter told me about it. . What is so important that has kept you here for three days then? Don't tell me you came all the way from Ibadan just to say hello”

“I have been given a job in this town as a teacher. I will be

here for a while; I don't know for how long”

“Is that so? That is wonderful. I will see you later then, because I am now on my way to my farm. We old people need to get out of the house as often as possible , otherwise Death will soon come calling while you are lying down and doing nothing”, Baba told him .

“Can I come along with you?” he asked, seizing an excellent opportunity to relate more closely with Baba Lamidi.

“You think you are able to do that? You people from the city can barely stay thirty minutes on your feet” Baba chuckled.

“In that case, will you kindly permit me to surprise you?” Yomi promised.

“As you wish then”, Baba replied, shrugging frail shoulders.

“How will you get to farm? How do you usually go there?” Yomi asked

“Usually, Atanda drives me in my car .But today the car has a problem starting, so we aim to just take a bus to the highway and then walk the rest of the way. It is good exercise”, Baba said. A young fellow standing behind him nodded. He had the eager look of a school child on his way to a fun excursion.

“Let me take you there in my car”, Yomi offered.

“That is very generous of you. You are so kind”, Baba thanked him.

The journey was short. It took less than ten minutes to arrive at the footpath leading from the highway, to Baba Lamidi's farm. From there, they began the long walk. Yomi and Baba Lamidi

conversed as they walked. While Atanda quietly followed behind.

Yomi spoke enthusiastically of his experience at the Heritage Theater Project. Baba listened attentively, humming and nodding his head. He also spoke of his future project plans now that the Heritage Theater was in trouble; principal of which was to have his own stage and film production enterprise. The chat broke the monotony of their journey. Yomi reckoned they must have walked about a quarter of a mile through semi-forest before they arrived at Baba Lamidi's farm,

Yomi did not fail to notice that even though Baba Lamidi walked steadily and with determination, he made progress with more than a bit of difficulty. By the time they arrived at the farm, Baba Lamidi had become very sweaty and breathed with more difficulty than Yomi thought he should. Nevertheless, considering that Baba was in his seventies, Yomi thought that long walks should naturally be a challenge. Atanda, a young lad who came along with Baba however showed no sign of strain at all; neither did Yomi. The sun was yet mild.

"What do you think Baba?" Yomi asked, when they finally arrived at the farm

"I think you have a lot of good ideas. God will make it possible for you. I will certainly like to see one of your plays when you put it on stage", Baba encouraged.

"I'd rather you see one of them, as it progresses to the stage, Baba", Yomi was more optimistic.

"If that is what you wish, then God will make it possible",

Baba agreed.

“There is one play that is actually written for dance; or may I say instead a dance performance that is to be done as a play. I want it to become the most spectacular stage play anyone in the world has ever seen.” .Yomi persisted.

“When is it going to be acted? I will definitely want to see that one”, Baba Lamidi was hopeful

“I have not yet completed writing it. That is one of the reasons I have come here”, Yomi told him. Baba Lamidi looked disappointed.

“Young man, I will do what I am able to help; but as you can see, I am no more young. I no more have the strength that I used to have”, he warned.

The farm was really not really as big as Yomi imagined it would be. It contained a score or so, bays of yams and vegetables and perhaps a hundred cocoa and citrus trees. Baba was glad to take a rest at last. He sat on bench that constructed under an orange tree, and from whole trunks of small trees, tied together with vine.

“This fever again. I must remember to get myself some herbs on the way home”, Baba Lamidi wheezed.

Atanda, the young assistant Baba brought with him, knew what he was required to do. He harvested okra and pepper into the basket he brought. He also dug up some yams. One of the animal traps on the farm had caught a young duiker which Atanda slaughtered, gutted, and then splayed on a wooden cross-frame.

He made a fire of dry twigs and leaves and roasted a yam in it. On another fire he roasted the dressed animal.

“You are here alone? Do you not yet have a wife and children?” Baba asked. Yomi was for a moment flustered. This was not a part of his life he enjoyed talking about.

“I had a wife, but we could not live together. She left me and went away”. He decided to bare all. Baba Lamidi shook his head, regrettably.

“Women of nowadays are so foolish and impatient”, Baba said.

“I agree with you Baba”,

“I would say though I was very lucky with my first wife who is now departed. She was the gentlest woman and took great care to cover my inadequacies, while most women delight in taking to the street to tell the entire world where their husband has failed”, Baba shook his head some more.

“You said she is dead? What happened?” Yomi inquired.

“Oh, well we must always foolishly say one disease or the other killed a person; sometimes we would even say that it was the witches. I say it was her time to return to God that is all. Death took her away. It was a sad thing for me, but what can we do? The same will eventually happen to all of us whether we like it or not”, Baba grieved.

“That is so sad. Didn’t she have any children for you?”

“She gave me six wonderful children. All of them are grown up and working far away. Three are even overseas. Ajoke is the

youngest of them, and she is the one you met the other day”

“So you do not also have a wife living in your house?” Yomi wanted to know.

“I do have a wife. It will be unthinkable that a man should not have a woman with him in his house. Bejide is nearly as patient with me as the one who passed on, but she is young; nearly forty years younger than me. She was previously widowed; my wife was also dead. She was suggested to me by friends who thought I was lonely and depressed. We have four children together; the youngest of them was born four years ago”

. Yomi wondered bemused why some men still fathered children in their old age.

“My estranged wife took away our only child and forbade me to see him. I decided not to go to court to challenge this. I didn’t want to confuse the poor child even more” Yomi told Baba.

“That was a wise decision. Get on with your life and with your work. When your son is of age, he will come looking for his father. Be sure to make yourself a father that your child will be pleased and proud to find”, Baba advised.

Time passed quickly on the farm. Four hours or so after they arrived, they started back from the farm. Again Baba walked with so much effort and by the time they got to the road where the car was parked, he was again gasping for breath. On the way back home, they visited the home shop of a herbalist to purchase a remedy for Baba’s fever.

This was the first time Yomi had ever visited a traditional

medicine pharmacy and he was struck with wonder at the great array of articles assembled on the grimy tables and shelves. There were herbs, tree barks, strange seeds, and the dried skull of various animals - rodents, lizard, apes, goats and some other animals which looked like goats. There were dried whole animals, dried insects, leaves, stems, roots. He could also see what appeared like the flayed skin of a leopard, or was it a hyena? He wasn't sure. The herbalist's shop was indeed a horrendous store of items, many of them so revolting in their appearance and smell. Yomi was fascinated.

"I want to buy *agbo iba* ", Baba told the woman - thin, blank faced but with predatory aquiline features. She fetched a bundle of leaves and tree barks, wrapped it in brown paper and gave to Atanda. Quietly watching, Yomi, who had never in his life taken herbal remedies for any illness felt sure that those leaves when cooked together and drunk by the sufferer, would certainly make the person's illness worse than if he had not take any of the stuff at all.

Yomi dropped Baba off at this home, and promised to return next day to see how he is faring. He thought he saw Ajoke looking into the engine of Baba Lamidi's Peugeot Station Wagon which was parked at the side of the house. He couldn't be sure it was her though.

The day was not yet done with. He decided to pay the estate agent a surprise visit, if only to express his disappointment. Again, he only found the clerk there, and as usual she was

completely unhelpful. Yomi left a written message for Falana asking the estate agent to please call him back before the day ran out. What exactly he wanted Falana to call him about, he wasn't quite sure, other than to be assured that he had not been swindled. But in truth, his heart told him, quite confidently that neither the promised accommodation nor his money he would see. He wondered what other options there were for finding a house.

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